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Fryderyk Chopin in popular instrumental music

ABSTRACT: The author considers whether Fryderyk Chopin and his oeuvre may be regarded as part of popular culture – and if so, to what extent. However, the text is mostly taken up with analysis of popular instrumental music inspired by Chopin's works in various ways: from simple quotation, adaptation and transcription to more sophisticated instrumentation and arrangement, free improvisation or even the creation of a completely new work derived from a single motif or sample from Chopin. Consequently, the author deals with the problem of reception, but also with the issue of transculturation and the relationship between high and popular culture. The article shows and describes the variety of Chopin inspiration in a wide range of styles and genres of popular music, such as rock music, easy-listening, electronic music, dance music and disco.

KEYWORDS: Fryderyk Chopin, popular culture, popular music, instrumental music, rock music, electronic music, inspiration, reception

Fryderyk Chopin and his oeuvre shattered the image of the artist inherited from Ludwig van Beethoven and, together with German pioneers of romanticism, opened a new chapter in the history of music. In contrast to Beethoven, Chopin avoided large forms and large ensembles, writing music for one instrument only and cultivating miniature genres lasting barely a few minutes, regarded by listeners of the day as typically feminine.¹ Moreover, he was associated with the strongly feminised Parisian salons, representing a bastion of bourgeois tastes and culture.² Besides this, Chopin adored and took inspiration from various forms of nineteenth-century popular music: from his

¹ Interesting results of research into the gender attribution of some of the musical genres cultivated by Chopin are presented by Jeffrey Kallberg in *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex, History, and Musical Genre* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).

² A culture-gender duality is emphasised in the earliest feminist analyses of popular culture, e.g. Tania Modleski: masculinity-high culture vs femininity-popular culture. See Dominic Strinati, *Wprowadzenie do kultury popularnej*, tr. Wojciech J. Burszta (Poznań, 1998), 153–155; [Eng. orig. *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (London, 1995)].

native Polish folklore, through the popular urban repertoire, to arias from the best known operas.³

In spite of these few telling facts, suggesting a certain affinity between Chopin (or Romantic music in general) and popular culture, considering his person and his oeuvre from the perspective of the “lighter muse” can still cause controversy. After all, the Polish composer’s figure and work seem so strongly rooted in the elitist and perfectionist conceptions of culture which emerged from the Romantic era (particularly in German idealism, the Kantian idea of genius, the Hegelian concept of art as the manifestation of an absolute spirit, and the metaphysical views of Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffman) that pop-culture, inextricably linked to the mechanisms of the free market and to mass distribution, stands poles apart from the philosophy that gave rise to Chopin and his musical legacy.

Paradoxically, however, in the last century, the reception of Chopin’s work burgeoned so vigorously, taking on such a rich variety of forms, that it may be perceived as a universal and global phenomenon. As a consequence, today Chopin and his oeuvre not only constitute a kind of bridge between two opposite, seemingly contradictory, dimensions of culture (elitist and mass), but can also be treated as an element of contemporary popular culture. In support of this thesis, it is worth invoking the opinion of the musicologist Waław Panek, who, in the first Polish dictionary of “music for entertainment”⁴, asserted in the entry on “popular music”:

Some consider that [this] term excludes music hitherto regarded as classical (also called “serious” or “concert”), which from a logical point of view seems odd, since, for example, the work of Chopin is highly popular in Poland and not alien to the mass audience.⁵

It is impossible not to concur with Panek that the Chopin repertoire is indeed part of the musical experience of many Poles and, as a result, is also a specific kind of Polish popular music. There is little doubt that only a small percentage of Poles have never come into contact with Chopin and his music. The Polish education system, state cultural institutions and state mass media appear to favour the popularisation of Chopin’s music on principle. One ex-

³ Interesting remarks on the feminisation of Chopin’s music and its links to the culture of the Parisian salons and to nineteenth-century popular music can be found in Jim Samson’s article ‘Myth and reality: a biographical introduction’, in Jim Samson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin* (Cambridge, 1992), 1–8.

⁴ The Polish term “muzyka rozrywkowa” (literally “music for entertainment”) is a synonym for “popular music”. However, in Polish it is still more common, being a natural antonym for “muzyka poważna” (“serious music”), as “classical music” is more often known.

⁵ ‘Muzyka popularna’, in Waław Panek, *Mały słownik muzyki rozrywkowej* [A small dictionary of popular music] (Warszawa, 1986), 89.

ample of this is public television, which in spite of the continual tutting over falling standards and politicisation, still constitutes a primary source of knowledge about the world for the majority of Poles.⁶ Chopin and his work are aired with greater or lesser frequency, as indeed the television authorities scrupulously list among their services to society in their annual mission reports.⁷ The music of the genius from Żelazowa Wola can be heard during successive editions of the International Chopin Piano Competition, on anniversaries of the composer's birth and death, in biographical films about him, in broadcasts of major piano recitals, during national ceremonies and in patriotic programmes and films. So it is a strongly medialised phenomenon. According to the sociologist Marek Krajewski, it therefore fulfils the basic condition for being part of contemporary popular culture, which has reached the stage in its development of "popularising reality"⁸. Krajewski is of the opinion that appearing in the mass media is today a *sine qua non* for existing in reality, for having significance and exerting any kind of influence: "Only those areas of life that are 'media-friendly' and can be expressed in 'media-speak' exist and carry weight in public life"⁹. Secondly, within the context of "popularising reality", of crucial importance to society are only those phenomena that bring pleasure to the individual. For this reason, nearly every aspect of daily and public life – be it education, religion, politics or art – must to some degree mimic the products of popular culture.¹⁰ Contrary to Chopin's initial intentions, this is currently happening with his music, as well, as it gives pleasure to the mass audience through the intermediary of the mass media and thanks to the mechanisms of the free market. Therefore, it may be treated as functionally popular music, since it has become an element of pop-culture irrespective of its creator's wishes. However, a much more important role is played here by the musical artefacts of contemporary Chopin reception, which are in principle products of popular culture. Reference here to popular ar-

⁶ See Andrzej Koziół with Danuta Grzelewska, 'Polska Telewizja w latach 1952-1989' [Polish television 1952-1989], in *Prasa, radio i telewizja w Polsce. Zarys dziejów* [Press, radio and television in Poland. An outline history], eds. Danuta Grzelewska, Rafał Habielski, Andrzej Koziół, et al., 2nd edn (Warszawa, 2001), 301.

⁷ See e.g. *Sprawozdanie Zarządu TVP S.A. z wykorzystania wpływów abonamentowych na realizację misji publicznej 2009. Załącznik do uchwały Nr 189/2010 Zarządu Spółki TVP S.A. z dnia 11 marca 2010 roku* [Report of the TVP S.A. board on the use of subscription fees for carrying out its public mission in 2009. Annex to resolution 189/2010 of the TVP S.A. Board of 11 March 2010], 14 and 48-49. PDF online: <http://www.tvp.pl/o-tvp/bip/aktualnosci/sprawozdanie-zarzadu-tvp-sa-z-wykorzystania-wplywow-abonamentowych-na-realizacje-misji-publicznej-2009/1463804>. Accessed 20 June 2010.

⁸ Marek Krajewski, *Kultury kultury popularnej* [The cultures of popular culture] (Poznań, 2003), 83-94.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

rangements and adaptations of the Polish composer's works, and also to that output from the realm of light music for which Chopin and his music are a source of musical inspiration. It is thanks to this repertoire that Chopin's legacy has become embedded in the world of musical pop-culture, and it is to this repertoire that the present article will be devoted. However, given the huge amount of material, an exact profile of which would far exceed the framework of this text, I will focus on popular instrumental music alone. And although in reality it forms only a small part of popular music, in the context of Chopin reception it is quantitatively substantial and highly significant.

Chopin's influence on popular instrumental music will be analysed here primarily in terms of "compositorial reception". The typology of the repertoire under analysis is based on the range of inspirations and references to Chopin's works. Within this typology, three categories of this reception can be distinguished:

1. Compositions containing quotations of Chopin's music.
2. Transcriptions, arrangements and re-workings of selected compositions by Chopin, in their entirety or in some significant part, for instruments or groups associated with popular music.
3. Compositions inspired by the style or substance of particular works by Chopin.

However, these categories can also overlap, especially the first and the third, when a quotation becomes the starting point for the creation of a completely new work.

Secondary criteria for our analysis will be the degree of similarity to the original compositions, and so the extent to which the borrowed material is transformed, and the level of compositional creativity displayed by the composers/arrangers. In the above typology, the extent of the material's transformation and the degree of compositional creativity can be entirely independent of one another in all three categories. For example, the use of a quotation or an arrangement can be both creative and re-creative.

It is most difficult to identify works from the first category. Contrary to opinions that persist among critics accusing popular music composers of a lack of artistic invention, and even of feeding off high culture like parasites¹¹, Chopin quotations are always more or less re-worked, and they often provide inspiration for the further flow of the musical narrative. Examples of Chopin quotations can be found even in niche genres of popular music, such as the ever-controversial heavy metal. Research carried out by Robert Walser showed that the classical repertoire had a huge influence over the develop-

¹¹ See Dwight Macdonald, 'Teoria kultury masowej', in Czesław Miłosz (ed.), *Kultura masowa* [Mass culture], tr. Czesław Miłosz (Kraków, 2002), 15 [Eng. orig. 'A Theory of Mass Culture', *Diogenes*, 1/3 (1953), 1–17].

ment of heavy metal¹², and although the music of Chopin did not play such a crucial role here, references to his compositions can still be found. Among the Chopin works most frequently quoted in heavy metal is the *Marche funèbre* from the *Piano Sonata in B flat minor*, Op. 35. This appears in the work of amateur, semi-professional and professional groups (e.g. Die Apokalyptischen Reiter), and even in mainstream heavy metal. One interesting example is an arrangement by the pioneers of doom metal, the Swedish band Candlemass, which appeared on their 1987 disc *Nightfall*. This is based on a quotation from the first part of Chopin's march. The accompaniment uses distorted guitar and synthesiser choir sounds. The drummer, meanwhile, beats out a regular crotchet rhythm imitating the sound of kettledrums in thirds, and hemidemisemiquaver strikes on the tom-tom appear on the third beat. Electric guitar in high registers plays the first sentence of the theme from the beginning of the *Marche funèbre*, shortened to six bars, three times. This laconic, and perhaps rather unambitious arrangement can be treated as a kind of interlude between the songs on the disc. There is no virtuosity or building of drama, but rather the forging of a bleak mood, which happens to be one of the characteristic features of doom metal music.

A similar type of setting, situated between extensive quotation and arrangement, and so between the first and second categories, is a version of the *Polonaise in A major*, Op. 40 No. 1 by the Polish multi-instrumentalist Krzysztof Toczko. Associated for many years with such groups as Dżem, Ptaaki, Zdrowa Woda and Paradox!, Toczko currently performs also as a solo artist under the pseudonym pARTyzant. Recently, he has specialised in two-handed tapping on an electric guitar with two fingerboards. In a way, this technique imitates playing on keyboard instruments, since the fingers of both the hands strike the strings on the fingerboard with a hammer motion. However, the original arrangement of this polonaise, a recording of which was placed on the artist's website¹³, is not an exact guitar transcription of Chopin's work, as seems quite obvious given the different technical capacities of the two instruments. For example, some motifs were cut from the accompaniment or moved to other registers. Many members of chords are also missing, which means that the harmony is less dense. Yet the reductive character of this arrangement is determined not by technical issues alone, but also by Toczko's approach to musical form. It comprises solely the first part of Chopin's three-section work. What is more, pARTyzant also makes no claims to giving an authentic-style performance in his interpretation. We have here effects

¹² See Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil. Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middletown, 1993), 57–107.

¹³ http://partyzant.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=11&Itemid=8&lang=pl. Accessed 20 June 2010.

that are typical of rock music, such as slapping, slide and the shifting of accents resulting from a quite free, as if improvisatory, approach to rhythm, but also extra chords in the cadences. This arrangement should be treated rather as a musical curiosity, experiment or party-piece, based on a widely familiar standard of classical music.

But the performance of Chopin's music by famous rockmen is by no means rare. The greatest guitar virtuosos in the world have wrestled with adaptations of works by the Polish composer. One might mention here Ron "Bumblefoot" Thal, currently one of the guitarists with the group Guns N'Roses, who earned renown for his brilliant, peerless performance of an arrangement of Chopin's *Fantasy-Impromptu*, Op. posth. 66. This arrangement, entitled "Chopin Fantasie", appeared on the compilation album *Ominous Guitarists from the Unknown* (1991), featuring recordings by then little known American virtuosos of the electric guitar.¹⁴ Thal's adaptation features the first part of Chopin's original, which is at once also the section that closes the work. The middle section, meanwhile, is an original composition only slightly linked to the material of the *Fantasy-Impromptu*, where the guitarist displays the expressive capacities of his instrument. For example, he leads cantilena and a two-part passage, introduces a succession of figurations and plays with sonoristic effects. In his arrangement, Thal performs the part of the right hand from the piano original on a distorted guitar, with extensive use of the techniques of tapping (including two-handed tapping), hammer-ons and pull-offs. However, his arrangement has an enhancing, rather than reducing, character, since the left-hand part is performed by a pianist on a synthetic piano, and additionally in the background a quite simple percussion part appears, which then becomes much more complex in the final repeat, containing the frequent use of double bass drum and spontaneous passages disturbing the regular rhythmic flow. Ron "Bumblefoot" Thal's arrangement, which could be classified between categories two and three of the typology discussed in the introduction, is still hugely popular today. Evidence to this effect are the score and tablature of his arrangement and instruction films recorded specially for guitar magazines in which the musician shows how to play his adaptations.¹⁵ Further confirmation of its popularity are the legions of young amateur guitarists uploading onto the Internet videos of their struggles with Thal's technically challenging arrangement.¹⁶

Another example of a rock virtuoso taking inspiration from the work of the Polish Romantic is that of Jimmy Page, who in the 60s came to fame as

¹⁴ <http://www.bumblefoot.com/discography/comp/comp.htm>. Accessed 20 June 2010.

¹⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQgEa7W7Mqk>. Accessed 20 June 2010.

¹⁶ http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=ron+bumblefoot+thal+chopin&aqf. Accessed 20 June 2010.

the guitarist with The Yardbirds and later as the co-founder of Led Zeppelin. In 1981, he was persuaded by director Michael Winner to record the soundtrack to the film *Death Wish II*.¹⁷ One of his compositions for that movie, entitled "Prelude", is an adaptation of the *Prelude in E minor*, Op. 28 No. 4 by Chopin. Here, Page plays the right-hand melody from the piano original on a distorted guitar. At first glance, the idea of focussing on one of Chopin's simplest melodies might seem a guarantee of artistic failure. Yet Page's arrangement is one of the most successful settings of this prelude in popular music, and the guitarist himself has returned to it many times in his solo concerts. In the Chopin, virtually the whole of the tension and drama are contained within the chromatically changing chords of the accompaniment, beat out with greater or lesser dynamic intensity by the left hand. The melody seems to be at most a supporting element to the harmony, and although the lack of development creates a mood of expectation, it plays an essential role only in the bridge and the climax of the work. In Page's arrangement, however, in which a static accompaniment is formed by sustained chords on an electric organ, the monotonous beating of drums and (the only instrument bringing a little variety) bass guitar, the whole emotional charge centres on Chopin's melody, played by the guitar. It is not treated literally by the instrumentalist, but rather constitutes a starting point for nuanced, utterly unvirtuosic improvisations, which should be considered in terms of rock ornamentation. Besides this, the uniqueness of Page's version lies in the very approach to his playing on the instrument. He avoids pure electric guitar sounds almost entirely, overusing the technique of bending. This involves pulling the strings on the fingerboard with the fingers of the left hand, which disturbs the stability of the note's intonation. Thanks to this, he managed to recreate in an original way the tearful, even lamenting mood of the prelude's melody, which could never be brought out on the keys of a piano.

It seems that Jimmy Page could have taken some inspiration from a version by one of the pioneers of "exotic" music, namely Les Baxter, who in 1968 recorded the album *Moog Rock: Great Classic Hits*, featuring the greatest hits of classical music recorded on a Moog synthesiser. Among works by Borodin, Bach, Rachmaninov, Grieg and Debussy, this disc also includes arrangements of three works by Chopin: the *Prelude in E minor* and *Fantasy-Improvisation* (both in a style bordering on easy-listening and the then popular psychedelic rock), and also a mambo-style version of the *Etude in E major*, Op. 10 No. 3. In the prelude, performed at a relatively quick tempo, besides the presentation of the various colouristic possibilities offered by the Moog (which is in effect an equivalent here of the piano), an important role is also

¹⁷ 'I first met Jimmy on Tolworth Broadway, holding a bag of exotic fish...', *Uncut*, January 2009, 47.

played by the bass guitar, with a syncopated rhythm and a sound that brings out the upper harmonics in the range, characteristic of that period, and also the percussion, with the clearly foregrounded trance-like pulse of the cymbals. Apart from the fact that the prelude is performed with repetition, Baxter's arrangement does not interfere significantly in the musical fabric of Chopin's original. Consequently, it may be regarded, together with the setting by Jimmy Page, as a typical example of the second category in the typology of the compositorial reception of Chopin.

As a matter of interest, it is worth noting here that Baxter's version of the prelude was given a new lease of life many years later in a deep house mix entitled "Ghosts In My Machines" by the Glasgow DJ Milton Jackson (2008). In this dance composition, a characteristic sample taken from Baxter's "Chopin Prelude in E-minor" appears many times in the bridge passages.¹⁸ On one hand, this is an interesting instance of the artistic recycling of a forgotten recording; on the other, it exemplifies what Krister Malm calls transculturation, or a musical transplantation in time-space.¹⁹ "Ghosts In My Machines" shows how Chopin's music, composed in Valldemosa towards the end of the 1830s, via an adaptation from the 1960s by an American musician, ultimately reaches contemporary lovers of club music.

The album *Moog Rock: Great Classic Hits* arose out of Les Baxter's fascination with the analogue synthesiser of Robert Moog – the first commercially available electronic keyboard instrument. Baxter was also inspired by the huge artistic and commercial success of Walter Carlos's pioneering disc *Switched-On Bach*, from 1968, on which Carlos performed Bach's works on a Moog. Around the turn of the 60s and 70s, synth arrangements of classical works were all the rage. Musicians were agasp at the hitherto unknown modern timbres of electronic instruments.²⁰ Another album to emerge from that wave was Hans Wurman's *Chopin à la Moog*, from 1970, on which the artist performs works by the Polish composer solo or with string orchestra. In spite of the high standard of the performances and the highly imaginative approach to colouring, this recording was not as successful as the other two mentioned here. And yet its combination of traditional repertoire and a futuristic sound is a quite successful experiment and undoubtedly a sign of times in which synthetic interpretations of the classics became an almost obligatory performance style.

A somewhat different face of popular music is represented by the arrangement of Chopin's *Nocturne in E flat major*, Op. 9 No. 2 by the French musician

¹⁸ <http://www.discogs.com/artist/Milton+Jackson> Accessed 20 June 2010.

¹⁹ Krister Malm, 'Music on the Move: Traditions and Mass Media', *Ethnomusicology* 37/3 (1993), 339–52.

²⁰ Thom Holmes, *Electronic and Experimental Music: Technology, Music, and Culture*, 3rd edn (London, 2008), 209–221.

Richard Clayderman, who has sold the greatest number of discs with piano music and is regarded as the best known pianist in the world.²¹ He owes his enormous success to the fact that he specialises in artistically less ambitious commercial music in an easy-listening style, particularly in popular adaptations of the best known classical melodies. Yet Clayderman was not the first or the last musician to tread such a path. A similar repertoire is cultivated by many contemporary musicians, such as André Rieu and Helmut Lotti, to name but the most famous. Their sizeable (but usually produced with very little creative work) artistic output includes arrangements of the most popular works by Chopin, such as the “Tristesse” *Etude in E major*, Op. 10 No. 3. Due to its accessibility and effective marketing, music of this type has millions of fans around the world, and some of Clayderman’s supporters even assert that “he has arguably done more to popularise the piano around the world than anyone since Beethoven”²². However, he also has his fierce opponents. Well known is the opinion of one German critic: “Es gibt Frisöre und es gibt Pianisten. Der Franzose Richard Clayderman ist ein Pianör”²³. The arrangements produced by Clayderman, or more accurately by the whole group of arrangers from the Delphine label collaborating with him²⁴, most often simplify the texture of the piano original and add instruments that are typical of pop music, such as acoustic guitar, bass guitar and drums, as well as a string ensemble. A perfect example of this is the *Nocturne in E flat major*, which appeared on the 1989 album *Concerto*. The metre in the right hand was altered from 12/8 to the simpler 4/4, and embellishments were removed in many places in the melody (e.g. in bars 5 and 8). Additionally, bass guitar appears from the very beginning – initially doubling the first notes in the bar from the bass ground of the accompaniment and later becoming increasingly independent, although still in the background. Also from the very beginning of the work, the piano is accompanied by string orchestra, playing in unison long notes that change every half bar and then introducing a melody that is heterophonic in respect to the principal theme. A quiet acoustic guitar accompaniment in semiquaver rhythms appears after the first repeat of the theme, and from section B onwards, a drum part is brought in, with a uniform rhythm without transitions delicately tapped out on a hi-hat and snare drum’s frame.

This is a typical example of easy-listening, sometimes known also as elevator music or mood song. Works of this type have a recognisable, catchy melody, but they are not overly dramatic and do not absorb the listener’s attention, acting as a background, for instance, to various everyday activities. Al-

²¹ http://www.clayderman.co.uk/home_page.htm Accessed 20 June 2010.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Michael Naura, *Jazz-toccata* (Reinbek, 1991), 209.

²⁴ http://www.clayderman.co.uk/the_delphine_team.htm. Accessed 20 June 2010.

though this type of repertoire has many opponents, for instance among adherents of the views of Theodor Adorno, and is criticised for its “standardising”, “pseudo-individualising” and promoting of passive, “regressive listening”, it should not be condemned out of hand, since it has its place in culture and fulfils functions that other genres or styles of music could not. In addition, it meets the aesthetic needs of a less demanding audience, relaxes, and at the same time introduces the average listener to the foreign, and at times perhaps overly involved, world of classical masterpieces.²⁵

To close, it is worth just mentioning two exceptionally important Polish albums released in 2008 devoted entirely to Chopin inspirations in popular music: *Rock loves Chopin*, containing rock arrangements, and *Astigmatic Inspired by Chopin*, featuring electronic music. These projects are so successful that one could devote a separate musicological study to them, not just illustrating the question of Chopin reception in the most recent Polish popular music, but also showing the condition of Polish art-rock and the latest trends on the club scene.

Rock loves Chopin is the idea of Andrzej Matusiak, director of Stołeczna Estrada. In general terms, he was inspired by the concept of popularising the Chopin repertoire among those listeners whom the music of the great Polish Romantic, for whatever reason, could not reach. The album comprises eleven rock arrangements of Chopin works made by leading Polish rock musicians, including Jan Borysewicz, Wojciech Pilichowski, Anna Serafińska, Grzegorz Markowski and Włodek Tafel. The classical pianist Janusz Olejniczak also participated in the project. The producer, musical director and arranger is one of the leading Polish guitarists of the young generation: Radek Chwierański. The works arranged are the *Polonaise in A major*, Op. 40 No. 1, *Waltz in D flat major*, Op. 64 No. 1 (“Minute”), *Prelude in A major*, Op. 28 No. 7, *Fantasy-Impromptu*, Op. 66, *Polonaise in A flat major*, Op. 53 (“Heroic”), *Etude in C minor*, Op. 10 No. 12 (“Revolutionary”), *Prelude in E minor*, Op. 28 No. 4, *Waltz in E flat major*, Op. 10 No. 1 (“Grande Valse Brillante”), *Nocturne in E flat major*, Op. 9 No. 2, *Waltz in C sharp minor*, Op. 64 No. 2 and *Scherzo in B flat minor*, Op. 31.²⁶

One accusation that could be levelled at the arrangements on this disc is that Chopin was treated almost solely as an outstanding melodist; the artists

²⁵ For detailed research into this area, see Joseph Lanza, *Elevator Music: a Surreal History of Muzak, Easy-Listening, and Other Moodsong* (New York, 1994); Anahid Kassabian, ‘Popular’, in *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture*, ed. Bruce Horner and Thomas Swiss (Malden, 1999), 113–123; Anahid Kassabian, ‘Ubisub: Ubiquitous Listening and Networked Subjectivity’, *Echo* 3/2; <http://www.echo.ucla.edu/Volume3-issue2/kassabian/index.html>. Accessed 20 May 2009.

²⁶ See http://www.agora.pl/agora_pl/1,87336,5307552.html oraz <http://astigmatic.pl/index.php?cat=6>. Accessed 20 June 2010.

taking part in the project focussed almost entirely on tunes from his works, which meant a substantial marginalisation of other aspects of Chopin's music, such as harmony, rhythm and form. Yet this also has a positive aspect, since the electric guitar that dominates the arrangements passes freely from Chopin's themes to dazzling virtuosic solos inspired by the composer's melodies, which is one of the strong points of this album. Besides this, the reduction of the harmony or rhythm of the original induces the artists of *Rock loves Chopin* to shift their musical creativity to other areas. These include questions of stylisation, improvisation and interaction between the performers. For example, there is a group of works based on the idea of dialogue between instruments, such as the arrangement of the *Polonaise in A flat major*, Op. 53, in which the original piano parts appear in alternation with a rock group – a sort of reference to the idea of concertato style. Another example is the *Scherzo in B flat minor*, Op. 31, where Radek Chwierański improvises on electric guitar on the theme of this work, either playing in alternation with fragments of Chopin's *Scherzo* rendered by Janusz Olejniczak or improvising to their background. The arrangement of the *Fantasy-Impromptu*, in turn, is based on a rivalry between two electric guitars, which actually turn out to have been recorded in the studio by the same musician. Ideas of a different kind appear in the *Prelude in A major*, Op. 28 No. 7, which is stylised somewhere between world music and easy-listening, or in the *Prelude in E minor*, Op. 28 No. 4, in a smooth jazz rendition, with vocalises by Grzegorz Markowski and Patrycja Markowska and improvisations by Wojciech Pilichowski on bass guitar.

Astigmatic Inspired by Chopin was issued under the initiative of the organisers of the Astigmatic International Festival of Electronic Music, who describe the project in the following words:

This release contains tracks by some of the hottest and most interesting producers and composers, the biggest, most valuable and original artists of the independent club scene, whom we have approached to create music inspired by Chopin. [...] Chopin is here the genuine artist inspiring the musicians whose renditions appear in this least bombastic and solemn of compilations. [...] Each of the artists had total creative freedom. The theme was unfettered imagination and rejection of imposed and limiting overall visions. The cool, the sense of humour and Chopin as the symbol of cosmopolitanism are the three pillars of the release. These are also the values of the Astigmatic festival.²⁷

Among the musicians to present their Chopin inspirations here are such representatives of contemporary club music as Kosma, Daniel Wang, Munk, The Glimmers, Amazing Clay, Krazy Baldhead, Joel Martin, Maximilian

²⁷<http://astigmatic.pl/index.php?cat=6>. Accessed 20 June 2010.

Skiba, Mr Krime feat. Aga Zaryan, Blackjoy, Telonius, Morgan Geist, Krikor, Lady Aarp and DJ Feel-X.

Artur Koryciński, one of the founders of the Astigmatic festival, describes the style of the album as “a mixture of *musique concrète*, atypical classical music, neo-disco, baile funk, indie, oldschool house, soul boogie and cosmic”²⁸. The project is indeed extremely diverse, and not just in terms of style, but also on account of the varying approach to the question of inspiration from Chopin’s musical legacy. One notable feature is that Chopin’s works, where they are indeed used as raw material for new compositions (which for some artists did not seem necessary at all²⁹), were treated by the musicians in a most creative way. And although one can find here examples of all the categories from the reception typology outlined above, it is the third category, and a combination of the first and third categories, that is clearly predominant. For example, references to the *Fantasy-Impromptu*, Op. posth. 66 in Maximilian Skiba’s “Fantazja” inspired by that work are very veiled. Skiba’s work, adhering to the style of early disco and funk from the 60s and 70s, alludes to Chopin’s work only through the rhythmic motion of the bass accompaniment and rather indistinct flashes of figuration from the right hand of the original. A somewhat similar solution was employed by Krazy Baldhead, who refers to the specific rhythm of the *Fantasy-Impromptu* in his electro-boogie-style composition “Chopin 1.10”. In addition, the main bass loop is derived from motifs from the third and fourth bars of the piano accompaniment of the left hand, which, extracted from its context, takes on a quite unexpected, gloomy character. Krikor, meanwhile, in his arrangement, proceeds as if he was au fait with the secrets of Schenkerian analysis, producing a far-reaching decomposition of the musical fabric of the *Nocturne in F minor*, Op. 55 No. 1, stripping successive layers from the work and reducing them to the two basic chords that underpin his minimalist arrangement.

Also appearing on this disc are extremely interesting arrangements of the *Prelude in E minor*, Op. 28 No. 4. One of these, the work of Blackjoy, is a witty stylisation of Chopin’s work in the convention of Middle-East disco music. The unusual atmosphere is forged by a melodic motif based on the second tetrachord of a harmonic scale, repeated on a synthesiser, the use of African percussion instruments and a freely improvised soprano vocalise. And this is all supported by a disco beat and funky chords struck on an electric guitar. Lady Aarp and DJ Feel-X produced a dub and ska rendering of the *Prelude*, in which the most important role is played by detached chords, performed on a

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ For example, The Glimmers recorded a funk jam-session after listening intensely to Chopin’s music, yet the Chopin idiom is entirely undetectable in their recording. Churchill’s Leopards deliberately relinquished Chopin’s material, and Munk, in “This is not Chopin”, ostentatiously denied any inspiration from the composer’s work.

synthesiser with strong reverb, taken from the original accompaniment, and also a characteristic Jamaican beat and dub bass. In addition, the melody of the prelude does not appear for quite some time, except in bridge passages, whilst towards the end of the work, the musicians repeat the simple motifs of the principal theme from the beginning of Chopin's original, thereby underscoring the repetitive and dance-like character of the setting. Another peculiar reference to the *E minor Prelude* comes in the composition entitled "Zardoz", by the German hip-hop pioneer known as Kosma. This work refers not directly to Chopin's miniature, but to the song "Jane-B." by Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin (1969), which was a textualised, almost literary arrangement of the *Prelude in E minor*. Thus Kosma's arrangement belongs to the second generation of Chopin's covers. Here, the reference to "Jane-B." involves primarily Kosma's attempts to reconstruct the sound of French pop-rock of the late 60s. But he does not remain passive in respect to the original tonal material, which he processes thoroughly. Consequently, "Zardoz" is a completely distinct composition, from which only an attentive listener can extract the harmonic and melodic rudiments of the *Prelude's* motifs.

After this brief survey of the repertoire of popular instrumental music inspired by Chopin – a survey that naturally does not exhaust the issues involved – one can observe to what extent popular music is capable of absorbing, processing and entering into a creative interaction with classical repertoire. Although roundly criticised by representatives of the Frankfurt School for "standardisation", it has the potential to trigger creativity, as Bernard Gendron noted in the 80s in his article 'Theodor Adorno Meets the Cadillacs'³⁰.

Incidentally, one can derive from the present research an informal ranking of the popularity of Chopin's works. The most popular and most often arranged works are the *Prelude in E minor*, Op. 28 No. 4, *Fantasy-Impromptu*, Op. posth. 66, *Nocturne in E flat major*, Op. 9 No. 2, *Etude in E major*, Op. 10 No. 3, *Polonaise in A major*, Op. 40 No. 1 and *Marche funèbre* from the *Piano Sonata in B flat minor*, Op. 35. Paradoxically, this list shows that it is not necessarily the simplest and most accessible compositions, but rather the most recognisable, most distinctive and most singular works that are most popular with arrangers. This fact not so much speaks volumes about Chopin's oeuvre as actual and "potential" popular music, but also highlights some general features and mechanisms of the functioning of popular music.

Translated by John Comber

³⁰ Bernard Gendron, 'Theodor Adorno Meets the Cadillacs', in *Studies in Entertainment*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington, 1986), 18–38.

